

M. Shawn Copeland. *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018. 198 pages. \$26.

M. Shawn Copeland is a retired American womanist, former religious sister, and Black Catholic theologian. She is professor emerita of systematic theology at Boston College (where she had a joint appointment in the Program in African and African Diaspora Studies). *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience* continues her previous exploration in *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, with an emphasis on a specific theological anthropology focused on bodies, gender, race, and suffering.

The work is neither a theodicy proper nor a glorification of redemptive suffering. It is distinctively Catholic, both in self-identification and method of Catholic moral reasoning informed by Bernard Lonergan. It will, however, be fully accessible to non-Catholic theologians, clergy, and laity. Some essays have the tenor of guided Ignatian meditations and could be useful resources for adult church school classes or retreats.

The book is a collection of essays organized in three major sections (*From the Heart of the Quarter, Marking and (Re)membering the Body of Christ, and Following Jesus Crucified and Risen*), each grounded in the history of American chattel slavery and drawing out implications of a theology of the cross among enslaved African Americans and in the necropolitics of the plantation.

Copeland intends to “situate the broken body of Christ at the center of Christian reality and situate the broken bodies of black humans at the center of American reality” (97).

Copeland’s method of centering bodies allows her to bring the suffering of black bodies, queer bodies, and all bodies into synergy with the suffering body of the crucified Jesus. While many feminists and womanists have categorically rejected the crucifixion as a locus for theological reflection, Copeland deems that problematic, invoking Johann Baptist Metz’s caveat that “dangerous memories” should not be erased. “To fulfill that ethical obligation as church, we – who member it – must refuse to turn away from and must look directly at the dreadful history of chattel slavery. We must assume responsibility for the memory of chattel slavery, protecting that memory from trivialization, outright rejection or denial, and voyeurism; moreover, theology calls the church to lament” (98).

Chapter 1, “Dark Wisdom From The Slaves,” establishes origins in the transatlantic slave trade, chattel slavery, and the plantation -- what Copeland calls “a canon of anguish” and the distortions of Christian faith warped by white supremacy. Some will be familiar with this chronicle of forced assimilation and the ways enslaved persons heard and interpreted Christian teachings and developed their own oral traditions of liberation theology and freedom prayers. Because Jesus was himself beaten, tortured, and murdered, the enslaved believed that he understood them like no one else.

Chapter 2, “Meeting and Seeing Jesus,” is by far the most crucial. Copeland draws on Richard Horsley, John Dominic Crossan, and Obery Hendricks to create a Gadamerian fusion of horizons between the world of the enslaved and the world of Jesus’ Galilee to construct a “topos” for meeting Jesus, a whole landscape of pain, need, and eschatological expectation. Galilee becomes a site for resistance, the Beatitudes are protest speech, and the Parable of the Tenants becomes a critique of oppression. “Jesus calls his followers to do as he does, to be of complete and utter service to one another; he upends the world of lords and masters, servants and slaves” (52). The name of Jesus becomes a kind of sacred conjuring, beckoning the enslaved to freedom.

“A fearless and dangerous Jesus waits with God’s crucified people. He knows them and they know him . . . they know Jesus Christ crucified” (58).

The third chapter, “Marking the Body of Jesus, the Body of Christ,” shifts attention to the LGBTQ community, themes of *imago dei*, and malevolent heteronormativity. Copeland attempts to reverse traditional asceticism grounded in the cross, arguing that the cross enters into full erotic embodiment and is not a rejection or devaluation of bodies. She asserts that Christology must include *all* dimensions of corporeality and embodied particularities, a sacramental aesthetics of eucharist, a vigorous display of difference. “If Jesus of the Nazareth, the Christ of God, cannot be an option for gay, lesbian, transgender people, then he cannot be an option” (73).

The remaining chapters continue the Christological interrogation of the contemporary black experience in the United States, including the “shape-shifting” of white supremacy, the ethics of restorative justice, and discussions that will resonate with current issues of Critical Race Theory, the 1619 Project, the Prison Industrial Complex, reparations, sex-trafficking, and immigration. These theological reflections would be valuable resources for community or congregational exploration.

Copeland’s book is informed by Marianne Sawicki, Wendy Farley, Rebecca Chopp, Kelly Brown Douglas, Delores Williams, and Katie Cannon among others. She doesn’t argue with them (there is no polemic) but folds their ideas into her Christology. The book is a gem and should be in every scholar’s library and every pastor’s study. It would be particularly helpful for white scholars and clergy.

L. Susan Bond, Lane College, Jackson, TN